

Welcome Home . . . In Honor Now!  
(By Albert Caswell)

JOHN TILLITSKI

HON. JACK KINGSTON

OF GEORGIA

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

*Thursday, December 15, 2011*

Mr. KINGSTON. Mr. Speaker, when I was in 10th grade history class, the teacher caught me chewing gum. I don't know why it's so hard to chew gum without being noticed, but there I was caught and on my way to the Principal's office. I had never personally met him. He was a no-nonsense man named John Tillitski.

He asked me why I was sent to him. There weren't any official forms so when asked, you were expected to give a full report of your crime without equivocation.

"I was chewing gum, sir."

"Oh," He looked me in the eye and added, "Do you want to stay in school?"

"Yes, sir."

"Fine, bend over." With that, he pulled a 12" rubber sole of a shoe out of his desk, popped me on the hindquarters, and said, "go back to class."

That was it, verdict, sentence, and punishment. It was over in 5 minutes. Then I was back in class, sitting quietly, taking notes, and learning American history. No more chewing gum.

That's the way John Tillitski handled things. Clear. Concise. Fair. Without drama, without red tape, just old fashion, even-handed, blind justice.

It was 1971. He was a man suited for the time. We were the first white class to attend what had previously been the all black Burney Harris High School. The courts had spoken. The town was nervous, the administration tentative and the teachers incredibly challenged by the change set in front of them. Not Mr. Tillitski. He saw black and white not in skin color but in justice, fairness, and common sense. He could bridge the unsettled times with confidence.

The fear was that every fight, skirmish, or incident could accelerate into a race riot. In this atmosphere he became the "go to" guy. Everyone knew he was a straight shooter. If the issue could be resolved quietly he could do it.

A few years later, his son Chris and I decided to liven up the day by driving a motorcycle down the hall of the school. I should do the right thing and say it was a joint decision, but in the style of Washington politics I'll blame the whole idea on Chris, who in turn claimed his brothers Steve and Mike had pulled similar stunts. Down the hall we roared loudly as a jet plane. Soon, hundreds of students and teachers poured out of their classes trying to find out what had happened. We were surrounded by a mob of teachers and students, some laughing, some screaming, most in bewilderment. The principal was beet red in anger and unable to complete a sentence in his fury. Finally, Mr. Tillitski re-emerged from the throng. As the sea parted for his entrance, he simply said, "Turn the damn thing off and get it out of here." We pushed it outside, order was restored, and we were duly punished.

He was a man's man. Strong, gruff, and competitive. As the father of boys, he knew

boys needed discipline, love, and nourishment. Once, Chris and I found an old canoe in the river. Its seaworthiness had been beaten out of it by a series of rapids. We took it home to restore it, a long shot at best but Mr. Tillitski supported our effort. When we finally got it to float, he was the first to give us boat paddles.

Another time, Chris and I hopped a train and tried to make it to Myrtle Beach, S.C. We didn't disclose the details of our mode of transportation to our parents. We made it to Morehead City but ran out of track and trains headed in the right direction. Hitchhiking home, we informed our parents where we had been and announced that we'd try again soon. Rather than fighting about it, telling us we were stupid and how dangerous it was, Mr. Tillitski quietly let us borrow his prize green 1967 Mustang. Practically a sports car. Not a prettier sight was seen driving down the Myrtle Beach strip. He knew boys had to push an envelope but he also knew how to rein them in without killing our youthful spirit.

As with so many influential men there was a great family structure to go along with them. John's wife, Joan, was a wonderful partner standing by him, raising the boys and making sure the family bond stayed strong. As a trained nurse she knew when one of the boys needed a trip to the hospital, a bandage or a good hug. They are an ideal couple.

I was blessed to have people and educators such as John and Joan Tillitski in my life. In today's world with its confusion and uncertainty, we need more people with firm ideals and gentle hands to guide them. The world would be a better place.